

Prelude: The Inevitable Virtuality of Grief

I - Remembrance

It was May the 16th, 2005, the twentieth anniversary of Alicia Sylvester's death, and a thunderstorm raged outside Victor's lab, located in the basement of the Robinson building on the Wenzel University campus, just as it had always been, ever since his teaching career at his alma mater had first begun, eight years earlier. Sheets of rain lashed at the windows, the sound like that of large, ghostly fingers rapping upon the glass. Twenty long years had passed, yet Victor Arkenvalen could still hear the gunshots as they rang out in the old mental asylum, which lay on the outskirts of town. Briefly, he closed his eyes, and listened to the thunder. Thanks to the effects of Walther's mutagenic serum, he could hear the thunder roar for miles . . . the closer it was, the more it felt like a blacksmith striking a hammer against his skull. Thus, on top of everything else, he had a miserable headache. Taking the serum had originally been Noonian's idea, not his, though such distinctions were, at this point, academic. The serum had killed Alicia, after all . . . or at the very least, it had led to her death.

But before that, though, she had gone mad. She had brutally murdered eleven people, leading the three of them on a merry forensic chase for months, and had finally holed up in the asylum at the last, using it as a laboratory in which to conduct truly horrific experiments. She had finally been killed in a showdown with Walther, Joseph, and Victor himself. Victor remembered cradling her in his arms as she lay bleeding, remembered the emptiness in her eyes as she stared vacantly up into his . . . And while Joey and Walther had gone to phone the police—the nearest phone being a mile or so away—Victor had bundled her up and had taken her to his car and driven away, peeling out into the night. Half-mad with rage, panic, grief, and despair all at once, he had brought her to his family's summer home, where—thanks to his own line of research—he had already constructed what he called a “cryogenic” sarcophagus (though in the strictest sense, his method did not involve immersion in liquid nitrogen, but instead lowering the temperature of the air to similarly low levels). He had then injected Alicia with a special compound of his own—one designed to prevent tissue-damage at cryogenic temperatures—and had placed her inside, suspending her an inch above death. She remained there to this day, frozen, hovering, floating just above the threshold of the inevitable, with Victor—and, of course, his psychological counterpart, Noonian—stuck trying to find a way to revive her safely.

Standing there, watching the rain pitter-patter, Victor couldn't help but feel as hollow as the glassware on his lab table. The deep and lonely ache within him had not subsided over the years; it throbbed like a bad tooth, a sore on the skin of his soul. It didn't help that Noonian kept the fires of his hatred for Walther alive and well and burning bright in the darkest corner of his mind, deep in the black psychotic oblivion where he made his infernal home. But last he'd heard, Walther and his daughter were both in Nevada . . . well out of his reach. Perhaps that was a good thing. Every time Victor flirted with the notion of forgiving him and Joseph for their part in what had happened, Noonian would reach forth from the

blackness in his pit, and would forcefully remind him of what they'd done; of the warmth of Alicia's blood as it ran through his fingers; of the horrible emptiness he'd glimpsed in her eyes.

He wanted to just grieve, and move on. But Noonian would not let him. Deep down inside, he growled in his cave, angry and hungry, his craving for vengeance growing greater with each day. And yet, he had not taken it. He had not come forward—as he did from time to time—and murdered Joseph Michaelson, or Walther Roentgen, or his daughter, who was now eleven. Twenty years to the day since his birth—though really, hadn't he been around long before that?—and Noonian had yet to make his move against those he said had wronged him (for he had loved Alicia every bit as much as Victor did). Perhaps he was merely plotting, scheming, biding his time . . . waiting. For what, Victor did not know . . . though he had a bad feeling he would soon find out. He suppressed a shiver.

Unless, of course, he could bring Alicia back before that, and in doing so, put the genie that was Noonian back in the psychic bottle he'd come from. Momentarily, he looked over to where Alicia lay in her cryogenic crypt, dreaming strange dreams. She had rosebud lips and high cheekbones; her hair hung in black rivulets that framed her frosty, blue-tinged face. Gazing upon her sleeping form brought back memories. Happy memories. Well, he was determined, those memories would soon live again. One way or another.⁸

He sat down in his office chair, and felt his back pop. At forty-six, fifty wasn't the distant, faraway land it had once been, and the back problems and thinning hair weren't going to ever get better, only worse; the hair-loss was also side-effect of taking the serum, a reminder of what he was doing to himself—or what Noonian was doing to him—in an attempt to continue Alicia's work. That, and all those battles with Desirée Roentgen were starting to take their toll. He was not cut out, physically, for the life of a supervillain . . . yet Noonian had forced him to live one. And with Alicia gone, the rocky shores of midlife seemed, like his house in the Vineyard, to be cold and barren and empty, lifeless and without a pulse. The prospect of middle age—even old age—had a certain appeal when you had someone to look forward to sharing it with. But when the person you had made all those plans with was gone, time felt like a monster that waited in the shadows devouring you a little more each lonely night.

"Pris, are you online?" he said, addressing the air.

"Ready when you are, father!" came a calm, cheerful-sounding female voice from the speakers located on either side of the lab table. Despite his bleak mood, he grinned; he felt such a rush every time she called him by any variation of the word "father." She was still so young and tender; though a second was as a year to a computer, it had taken Pris several months to reach roughly the same level of maturity as that possessed by an average twelve-year-old girl, and mere weeks for her to reach her sweet twenty. Walther Roentgen had his daughter? Well, Victor now had a daughter too, even if she was "just" a simulation. Strictly speaking, Victor was a geneticist who specialized in studying evolutionary species-memory, not a computer scientist with a knowledge of artificial life. But he had found a way around that. Self-study was a wonderful tool, and even though he cursed Walther Roentgen and accused him of selling his soul by founding that infernal defense contractor, Mjolnir, Victor had his own connections inside the Department of Defense, and they had enabled him to get his hands on a device designed by Walther's top engineers—a positronic metacognitive processor, the world's first artificial brain. There was a delicious, poetic irony in the fact that

the man who had taken Alicia from him had also given him the means to bring her back—in some form or another.

He still hated him, though. They still hated him, with every fiber of their combined being, Victor and his alter Noonian hated Walther Roentgen. And that bastard Michaelson, too. They could both burn in hell for what they'd done. What he'd helped them do.

Presently he cleared his throat, and spoke again: "Pris, I need you to copy over all the files from my personal account on the server at home over to the private servers here. Then raise the temperature in the room five degrees, and put yourself in diagnostic mode. Today's the big day . . . your mother is coming home."

"Oh, I'm so excited!" she squealed in her digital voice. The enthusiasm in her voice sounded as real and genuine as that of any little girl who had been away from her mother and missed her. "Okay, I'm done . . . files copied; currently in code-diagnostic mode. Ready when you are, dad."

"Okay, good," he said. "Let's do a quick diagnostic, shall we?"

"Sure," she said. "Hit me."

"Never!" he said, and laughed. God, he was so proud of her, and not just in the way he might be proud of an experimental subject, either. It had been that way at first, of course; he had approached her creation as coldly as any other scientist would have. But now? She was more, somehow. She was the equivalent of six trillion lines of ordinary program code—much of which she had written herself, using specialized generative algorithms. But there was more to her than that . . . an indefinable *je ne sais quoi*, a certain something that couldn't be quantified or calculated with equations . . . and that could maybe never be replicated. Or could it? He hoped against hope it could. She was the world's first true artificial life-form—something he suspected that even Walther's engineers hadn't thought of—and today was the day he planned on ushering in the second . . . and with it would come sunshine, pouring into a life that had been a harrowing ride on the roller-coaster of grief for far too long. The only bright spot in his life these past twenty years—amidst all the rage and tears and bitterness—had been Pris's creation, and the way he'd unexpectedly come to care for her as a daughter. He realized he was still smiling, and that startled him; smiles and laughter still felt foreign and odd to him, like trying on someone else's skin; he was still learning to be anything but broken . . . and Noonian's looming presence—he could sense him there, inside him, watching, looking out through his eyes—did not make that any easier. He cleared his throat again. "Now, then. Ready Pris?"

"All revved up with no place to go," she said, chipper as ever. There was *real enthusiasm* there; you couldn't program that.

"Okay, here we go," he said, and let out a long, slow breath. He stood, and took off his tweed sport-coat and loosened his bow-tie, and then ran a hand through what remained of his hair. "Why," he intoned, pacing as he spoke, "did the chicken cross the road?"

"Well, I . . . um . . . well, that is, er . . ." She sounded as though she were struggling. "I'm not really sure why one would *want* to. A chicken, I mean. Why would a chicken *want* to cross the road? What purpose would that serve?" She sounded a little confused, and angry; she knew there was something here she wasn't getting. "Sorry dad . . . but I'm spitballin', here."

"*Fuck!*" he cried, and banged his fist against the sleek BlipGlass computer console that covered the surface of his desk. She *still* didn't get it! Even if she'd said, *I know it's a joke but I still don't get it*, that would've been an improvement. At least she would've *understood*, which

was of course the point . . . to get her to recognize—perhaps even generate—ironic and humorous statements. It was an integral part of her emotional development, and he . . . well, he *worried* for her if she couldn't master it. Not only that, but Pris was, herself, only a stepping stone, and if he couldn't get *her* working right . . . “Goddam it,” he spat bitterly, and tossed his wire-rimmed spectacles onto the BlipGlass console. Strictly speaking, he no longer needed them—the serum had enhanced his vision well-beyond what most mortals considered “excellent”—but he still carried them anyway.

He caught himself before he got upset. Whenever he got upset—whenever he lost control—Noonian came forward, and he didn't need that right now. Pris's creation had originally been Noonian's idea; the whole plan had been his, in fact. Briefly, Victor wondered if his life with Alicia had, in fact, been entirely *his* . . . if Noonian hadn't been lurking within him, even then, just waiting for the right moment to burst forth and seize control of him. The serum seemed to be making him stronger . . .

Focus on Pris, he told himself. *She's what matter's most . . . not him and his shenanigans.*

“Did I do something wrong?” asked Pris, cords of worry tightening in her voice.

“I wasn't *talking* to you, Pris.”

“Are you angry with me?” She sounded sad, and a little frightened. Noonian, he knew, had *come forward* several times during her creation and testing, and had been cruel to her; she didn't understand that they were different people, just inhabiting the same body. But they were past that, weren't they? Why should she be afraid of him? After all all, neither he nor Noonian—to his knowledge—had ever towered over her or threatened to hurt her, the way *truly* abusive parents did sometimes . . . though that wasn't really a fair comparison, because Pris had no physical body . . . he had never had the opportunity to hug her or touch her or even truly *see* her. She had a sensory avatar in the vast, highly-secret virtual network known as the Neuroscape, but she never used it—at least, not with him around. He had threatened, cajoled, pleaded, begged, but it was no good . . . she would not show herself. Why, he wondered? Yes, Noonian might yell sometimes, but Victor had been awfully damn good to her. *Hadn't* he? Oh, hell, why not just admit it: He was a lousy father—he sucked at it, and knew it—so in a way, he guessed he didn't *blame* her for her . . .

“No Pris,” he said, trying to sound loving and level-headed. “You didn't do anything. It's me. I've simply . . . had a hard day, is all. Now, then, we should—”

“Father,” she interrupted, “I have a question.”

“Alright,” he sighed. “Ask away.”

“Okay,” she said. “Here goes. I've been reviewing our conversation, and I was wondering: Of what significance is the psychological construct known as ‘God’ to the chicken and her decision to travel perpendicular to the direction of the road? Is the chicken some sort of religious martyr?” Then, her voice took on an unmistakable lilt of sadness. “Or could it be that in crossing the road, the chicken is attempting suicide, and is seeking spiritual guidance before meeting her ultimate demise?” Another pause. “I like chickens. Do you like chickens, Father?”

“*EUREKA!*” he shouted, overjoyed, his fists in the air and his head thrown back as he laughed. The laughter felt good and right; it made him feel young again, the way he had felt the last time he and Alicia had gone ballroom dancing. All those dips and twirls . . . but those were nothing; right now, he felt like doing *cartwheels*. “Oh, Pris! Pris darling, have I *told you* how much I love you lately? I knew you could do it, *just knew it!* Dear God, this a breakthrough of . . . well, it's one hell of a breakthrough, I'll tell you that.” Laughing, he

plopped back down in his chair. It wasn't perfect, or the response that he was looking for (he had wanted her to laugh, after all), but it was better than nothing. It showed that she at least understood *why* it was funny, and he would count that as a victory.

"Jeez, all I asked was whether you liked chickens," she said. "You don't have to make a federal *case* out of it."

"I prefer cats, actually," he said, chuckling, bubbles of childlike glee bursting inside him. For a moment, he almost forgot about the pain and torture that was Noonian Harkonnen. Almost. "But I do like to *eat* chickens, I suppose. Does that count?"

"I've eaten virtual chicken, in the Neuroscape," she said, sounding proud.

Not with me, you haven't, he caught himself thinking, but refused to let anything spoil his good mood. So instead of validating the thought—it felt petty and distasteful—he simply asked, "Was it any good?"

"Oh, yes!" she said. "It tasted so *real* . . . then again, I really don't have much of a basis for comparison. But it *was* good . . . the chicken, I mean. Especially on pizza. I *love* pizza. I could write *sonnets* to pizza. I'd love to eat a real one, someday. Maybe you could build a body for me so I could. I could design one, if you like."

"I'm sure you could!" The giddiness washed over him in waves, like the heat of invention that had preceded it. Pris had only been "alive" for six short months, and had just now, finally, developed a sense of humor—*well, sort of*, he corrected, *it still needs a little work*—and with it, she had claimed the mantle of having her own existential identity as a fully fledged *person*. (She had also, thankfully, proven two centuries worth of science-fiction writers wrong by thus far *not* trying to take over the world. *But there's always tomorrow, though*, he thought, *not to mention Noonian's potential influence*. At the thought of Noonian and what he might do with a weapon as powerful as Pris, he shuddered . . . for he knew it was inevitable.) For a moment, Victor just stood there, letting the enormity of the moment sink in: He had created *life*, an act that many thought was reserved only for gods. And he had done it all as a mere *test*, to push the limits of the positronic metacognitive processor, to see if it could hold Alicia's consciousness. There was still no guarantee, of course—he tried very hard not to let his hopes get the better of him—but still, Pris flourishing as a thinking, *feeling* being was a promising sign. Besides, back in the day, he and Alicia had always talked about having a daughter one day, hadn't they? He figured Pris was as close as he was going to get. She might've been a disembodied soul floating in the virtuality of the Neuroscape—for what *was* a soul, but a living piece of software?—but she was *his*, by the gods, and nothing—*nothing*—could take that away. Not even Walther Roentgen or Joey Michaelson, not with all the revolvers in the world.

"Cats are nice, too," added Pris. "I've never petted a real cat. Virtual cats, sure, but I wonder if the fur of real cats would feel *different*. I'd like to find out someday."

"And you will," he said, hoping it was a promise he could keep. "But for now, we have a job to finish, Pris."

"Yes. Bringing mother back."

"Yes," he said, smiling. "And I'm pleased to hear you call her that."

"I've never *had* a mother before," said Pris, sounding thoughtful. "I wonder what it'll be like. Ooh, I wonder if there'll be girl-talk! I *so* enjoy girl-talk."

"And when did you meet any girls to have talked with?" he asked. "Forgive me if I like keeping tabs on you, but I know you have full-run of the Neuroscape, and you are, after all —"

“A teenager,” she said, and he could hear the mischievous grin in her voice. “I know. I met a girl named Britney in a virtual singles bar. I’m not sure if she was someone’s avatar or a program, like me. But she sure knew a lot about boys. And about sex.”

“And just how much might I assume *you* know about boys and sex?” he asked, surprised at how protective and he suddenly felt.

She giggled, a beautiful sound he had never heard her make before today. “I don’t kiss and tell, Father. Mind your own business! Don’t make me launch into a teenage-girl tirade about how I hate you and how you’ve ruined my life.” She laughed—she sounded eerily like Alice; a bright, upward soprano cackle, like a zigzag glissando, birds singing beautifully out of sync with one another—and hearing her do it made him grin a goofy, sentimental grin, a tear leaking from one eye. Even now, they gathered for a march down his face; they threatened to advance, then did so. He stood for a moment, weeping, his face in his hands. He stood that way for a full five minutes, time becoming elastic and stretching between the tears.

“Father, is everything all right?” she asked, cautiously. “You *are* still Father, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he said quietly, trembling. He wiped his face with his coat-sleeve. “I am. Now, then. You know that in order for this to work . . . I’ll need to interact with your avatar.”

“I know,” she said. “And I think I’m okay with that. Tell me father, when she comes back, will we be a family?”

He smiled. “Yes, love, we will indeed.” He cleared his throat. “Now, let’s get to work. This is the last mile of the journey. Let’s walk it together.”

“Sure thing, Father,” she said. “Ready when you are.”

“Then let us begin.” He put his glasses back on, ran a hand over his white goatee, then though his serum-thinned hair, and then sat down behind the expansive work-desk, then lowered his hands to the BlipGlass console, and began. Bright beams of morning sunlight played across the sleek surface of the workstation as his nimble fingers danced across the virtual keys. BlipGlass was another of product of his old friend Walther’s corporate brainchild, Mjolnir Technologies. It wasn’t used too much outside the military, but it soon would be; already, he knew, contracts were in place with major computer companies. (Of *course* they were; because Walther was—even Victor admitted—a genius.) The idea was to take a large sheet of glass embedded with tiny wires so that it could sense differences in capacitance, and stretch it over an equally large flat-screen monitor, creating what amounted to an enormous touch-screen interface. However, this sheet of BlipGlass was connected to no *ordinary* computer . . . no, *this* one was connected to a still-top-secret quantum-positronic operating core that Victor—well, Noonian—had stolen, along with the metacognitive processor. It had ten thousand terabytes of memory, and was ten thousand times faster than any computer currently on the planet. The perfect home for Pris’s—and soon Alicia’s—consciousnesses.

Victor sighed. Back in those halcyon days that seemed a lifetime away, he and Alicia and their friends Walther and Joey had all been stony-broke college students who had dreamt of changing the world, the lot of them scratching out a meager existence on federal loans and grant programs, staying up to ungodly hours, eating cheap Chinese takeout by the bucket, and spending every minute of free time in what Joey had dubbed “the Basestar”—the squat experimental science building that sat adjacent to the Engineering Campus, which was where his office was now. He could still remember the pale plaster walls and the tall, slender, prop-open windows on the top floor. Even now he could see the fantasy-art posters

hanging dog-eared on the walls, the tangled bunches of computer cables running over the cheap roll-up rugs, the myriad of computers with their guts all hanging out, the pyramids of empty soda cans and the stacks of empty pizza boxes. He could still smell the pungent odor of marijuana as the smoke curled in the air, and could still hear the clatter of people rolling dice during late-night games of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons. And running through all the memories, like pattern that emerged from the crisscrossing threads of a cat's cradle, was a picture of Alicia: Then in her mid-twenties, she had been tall, lithe graceful, with a gymnast's body—she had been an absolute maven when it had come to physical fitness, he remembered—the afternoon light causing her milky-pale skin to almost glow, her dark red hair like a waterfall of sculpted blood, her garnet-colored lips curled into a mischievous little smile, one corner higher than the other, her jade-green eyes glittering like emeralds infused with star-fire. (*Oh, Alicia*, he thought, nearing tears again. *Why couldn't those years go on forever, like they were supposed to?*) Would the new Alicia remember the intoxicating, acrid odor of fresh electronics being unpacked? Would she remember him kneeling before her out on the quad and asking her to marry him as Joey stood off to one side, holding a boom-box that played Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah"? Their wedding night? He hoped so, hoped against hope. And so, he set to work. He could feel Noonian within him, growing restless, wanting to *come forward* and seize control . . . but Victor resisted, refusing to let him be in charge, desperately clinging to the euphoria of creating life, and the high-pitched anticipation he felt at the idea of hearing Alicia's voice once again.

2 - Daughters And Memories

Victor took off his glasses and glanced at the clock. Hours had passed, seemingly in a blur. During that time, he had rigged up a series of quantum interferometry sensors and longitudinal wave detectors all around Alicia's head; the cryogenic temperature of her coffin supercooled their elements. With any luck, he thought, he could use them to read her brain's electromagnetic field much like one could read the magnetic field of a hard-drive, thus enabling him to "copy" her consciousness and encode it into the computer as a data-stream. But there would have to be a starting point—an initial spike in her electromagnetic field that would signal the beginning of the "recording." So, he had hooked the terminals of a defibrillator to her extremities. Were she awake, the jolt would hurt like a bastard—perhaps even kill her. But she wasn't awake, and was currently in cryogenic stasis. (Of course, he had had to thaw her out just a bit in order to get this to work, which meant risking the blood-loss accelerating back to its natural rate.) And, in order to create a "informational framework" in which to place her consciousness, Victor had methodically scoured the Internet for any and all records of her: Her shopping habits and the tastes they betrayed, her academic transcripts, everything she'd ever written, every award she'd ever won or picture that she'd been in; all her medical, dental, driving, and banking records; every MRI, CAT scan, X-ray . . . the list went on. He had painstakingly gathered it all up, this planet-sized mass of data, and—using the same generative algorithms that he'd used to create Pris—he had recreated his lost love's life in excruciating detail. The "transfer of essence" was the final, dangerous step; nothing like it had ever been attempted before (*ah, life on the edge,*

smirked Noonian from within, *you know you love it*), and it was to be the proverbial lightning strike that brought his beloved back to him.

“Neurological feedback protocols locked in and complete,” came Pris’s voice, startling him. “Perturbational complexity index is nominal.”

“Okay, here we go,” he said quietly. “You ready, Pris?”

“Ready when you are, I suppose.” She sounded apprehensive.

“You realize,” he said, “that it *has* to be done this way . . . and that if it doesn’t work, then I could very easily *die* in the attempt, my consciousness trapped forever within the virtual world. I could . . . I could *terminate*, Pris.”

“I . . . I know,” she said. Clearly, the solemnity of the moment not lost on her.

“You’d be left all alone,” he said, “a rogue program alone on the Neuroscape. You’d be in *so* much danger. If those military boys or Walther ever found out that you existed . . .”

“Id’ be very lonely,” she said, sounding sad. “Father, can this really work? Can this new program you’ve written . . . can it really . . . bring mother back to us?”

He was close now, he could feel it; his mouth was dry and his heart thumped with anticipation, threatening to burst through his ribcage at any second. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing at attention. He swallowed a rock in his throat.

“I hope so,” he said, and realized that he was trembling.

“Okay. I believe in you, father,” she said. “I’m finalizing the preparations now. It should only take me a few more minutes.”

“Take your time.” Victor had not spoken a word to Walther Roentgen in two decades. But the man *was* brilliant, and thus Victor did, at least, follow his work. And since Victor had government clearance himself, he often had access to many of the same things as Walther’s engineers over at Mjolnir Technologies. And, one of those things was the Neuroscape. Two years before, in 1999, the computer science division at Mjolnir had made a breakthrough: Not only had they successfully interfaced their positronic metacognitive processor with a human brain, but, they had figured out a way to hack into the cerebral cortex, and create *artificial realities* . . . virtual worlds so perfect in their detail that they fooled the brain into thinking they were actually real. The engineers at Mjolnir had been excited, and had wanted to take the technology public, but the Pentagon, ever watchful for new ways to train people to kill, had intervened. They had soon classified the entire project, but had kept Walther’s researchers—and the board of directors—deeply involved; only a handful of universities and government agencies knew about it or had access. The virtual space that they had created had been dubbed *the Neuroscape*. (A term whose coinage *reeked* of Walther Roentgen, Victor thought bitterly.) The Neuroscape was a virtual world, or rather, a *series* of virtual worlds, its topology and design similar to that of the Internet. In the Neuroscape, one’s nervous system was *physically bound* to one’s avatar . . . so that whatever befell one in cyberspace, befell one in the real world . . . though of course, the software could control the degree of influence between the two. In the Neuroscape, virtual blood thumped beneath one’s virtual skin, and sand squished wetly between one’s toes; staring at the sun for too long could injure one’s eyes; ice-cold snow would melt on one’s tongue. In the Neuroscape, paraplegic veterans could know what it felt like to walk once again; impotent executives could fuck themselves senseless with virtual schoolgirls whose bodies knew no limits; and a person—or at least, their avatar—could *literally* be whatever they could dream. Things like monsters, vampires, aliens, and zombies could all be as real or as dangerous as their programmers *wanted* them to be. In the Neuroscape, even the laws of

physics and biology were mutable, rewritable; the only limits were those of the imagination. It was easy to see why the Pentagon hadn't wanted it to go public!

Pris, her voice heavy with seriousness, said, hesitantly, "Father . . . I have a question."

"Fire away," he said.

"Is this . . . *right?*" she said, her tone plaintive. "What we're doing, I mean?"

This made him stop, his finger hovering over the icon-keys on the screen. "*Right?*"

"Yes," she said. "Is what we're doing . . . right?"

"Well, I already did it once with *you*. Would it be 'right' if you weren't alive, Pris?"

There was pause; the silence hung precariously on the edge of each moment.

"Hey, no fair," she said. "Besides, it's not the same."

"Oh, how so?"

"Because I am a *new* thing, and she is not. A new life, freshly born, a new *kind* of life, freshly made. But since she is one *dead* . . . what will *she* be?"

He sat down, took off his glasses, and sat there, staring at the icons on screen. Her plainspoken question—*what will she be?*—and his lack of an answer both hung pregnant in the air. The emptiness-echoing room began to feel cold, though he knew the temperature was constant and carefully controlled.

He turned to look at the picture on his desk: Alicia, as she had been twenty years before, still as beautiful as ever. She had been majoring in biochemical engineering. She looked so *young* in that framed, captured moment, a slice of memory preserved against the entropy of the ages. It was hard to believe she'd been gone for so long. At first, it had felt like he'd lost a limb, and like all people who had lost limbs, he could have sworn that he could still feel her here in the house, connected to him through the mists of her cryogenic tomb. This single photograph was the only one of her that he hadn't converted over into digital format. He liked its reality, its *thereness*, its tangible permanence; it stood in defiance to the grip of death's clutches. Its simple wooden frame spoke of the gentle hand that had carved it. Alicia had loved crafting, loved building things, loved making little keepsakes and tchotchkes. She had been working on this one just before she'd taken the serum for the first time, adding the final details, the hum of her engraving pen carried on the air in their cheap little apartment. Three months after the . . . *accident*, when he had finally been able to reenter her workshop without breaking down into heartache-ridden sobs, he had retrieved this one keepsake and, crying softly as he'd worked, a poor apprentice to her master, he had finished it for her. Looking at her frozen smile now, he remembered standing in the rain at her graveside, watching the polished wood of her coffin descend into the earth—he had chosen it because its design was subdued, yet artful; Alicia would've approved—trying oh so hard to acclimate himself to never again hearing her voice again.

Well, he thought, *I'll hear it again soon*.

"Pris," he said carefully, calmly, "I've always operated under the indomitable belief that science's forward momentum can set man *free* of the shackles that bind him, even the shackles of life, death, and—"

"Grief?" offered Pris.

"Yes, even grief," he finished, feeling annoyed at having been chastised in the middle of his speech, and speaking carefully to try to conceal it. "That belief, Pris, led me to create *new life* . . . you. And in a few minutes, I'll be drawing on that belief again, but this time I'll be making a new *afterlife*."

"But is it your *place*, Father," she pressed, "to do that?"

He suddenly felt a queasy sensation of vertigo and felt the world rush away from him in a blur as Noonian came bursting forth, *coming forward* at last . . .

“Goddamn it!” Noonian snapped, taking over. Victor could be so *weak*. Noonian could not abide weakness; it was what held evolution back. But that was beside the point. How *dare* this foolish child question his authority, his right to do anything! She was *his* creation, *his* to toy with, *his* to do with as he pleased. How could she not understand that? There was only *one* god in this lab, and it sure as hell wasn’t some vague, anthropomorphic deity in the sky!

“Now you listen to *me*,” he snarled. “I made you *smarter* than such theistic morality, Pris. Think *bigger*, you stupid bint! For millennia, humankind has *dreamed* of, *strived* for—hell, *lusted after*—immortality! Hundreds of priests and rabbis and prophets have all nattered on for centuries about heaven and hell, purgatory, the fountain of youth, reincarnation, karma, nirvana . . . yada yada yada. But how *real* is any of that? Well, now—and *thanks to me*, Pris, thanks to *my singular genius*—heaven is finally, truly a *reality*! And *my* heaven is a far more real thing than the wispy, ephemeral faery-tales of religion! So goddamn it, I’ve goddamned well earned the right to play . . . well, *God!* Hell, *someone* has to! Now, Pris, tell me . . . *Do you want your mother back or not, girl?*”

“Yes Noonian,” she said softly. She sounded sufficiently cowed. Good. Satisfied, Noonian retreated, back to the place in Victor’s mind he called home, and relinquished control. It always felt so *good* to come forward . . . he would have to start doing it more often . . . but for now, he *needed* Victor; they were two halves of the same coin; one could not exist—or produce breakthroughs—without the other. So as much as it sickened him, they would have to work *together* from here on out on this project. If he was to ever see his darling Alicia again—and Victor foolishly thought that it was *he* that she loved, *he* that had brought her to the height of ecstasy so many nights in their bedroom—then he would have to continue to draw upon Victor’s (admittedly inferior) genius, as well as his own unique talent for invention. And so, he retreated to the imaginary confines of Victor’s mind, into the black, haunted fortress where he made his home, a place where winged demons flew and lightning flashed from angry clouds; a place of despair and twisted reflection; the place he had first been given life. And as he worked in his fiendish laboratory there, in his dark castle of doom, secluded in Victor’s subconscious, so too would Victor work in *his* lab, in what was ostensibly the “real” world . . .

Victor blinked his eyes and looked up at the clock. Only a few minutes had passed, thankfully. Noonian had *come forward*, again, but not for very long. And yet, he knew that the cruel bastard could do great damage, even such a short space of time. Tentatively, he called out, “Pris?”

“Father . . .? Is that *you?*”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“He was here again. The bad man. Noonian. I don’t like him, Father. Will you—*can you*—protect me from him?”

Victor felt as though a vice were squeezing his heart. His mouth dry, he licked his lips and answered, quietly, “I’ll try, Pris.”

“I know you will. I believe in you, Father.” It was the second time today she had told him that. Perhaps he had underestimated her development as a life-form . . . after all, she seemed to have mastered that most complicated of human emotions—faith—though just as with most humans, he thought her faith misplaced.

“Thank you, Pris.” Noonian and his shenanigans—and whatever damage he might have done to her in the few minutes he had been free—would just have to wait. He was eager to get on with the experiment . . . he wanted this moment so badly, he could almost *smell* Alicia’s perfume on the air. “Now, then. Are we ready?”

“We are,” she said. “Father, I’m so excited!”

“As am I, my dear,” he said, and smiled wanly. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He reached over and grabbed his Motorola NeuroGlass unit off its charging receptacle (the term “NeuroGlass” was a leftover; it had been the proposed product name back when Walther had been thinking of taking the tech commercial). It looked like an ordinary pair of black, round, wire-rimmed glasses, but instead of the normal lenses, it had two silver, centimeter-thick cylinders, with glowing status LEDs mounted around their length and circumference. Where the frame would normally hook around the ears, it had two large plastic shells shaped like curved teardrops that pressed against the skull. It was more than just a computing appliance; it was a gateway to other worlds.

Gazing at the contraption now, Victor flashed back to his youth again. Basestar 2600, on a Thursday afternoon; the colors of the world had all been brighter then. She had been a curious grad student, interested in interferometric neural stimulation and how it could enhance the treatment of degenerative brain diseases. She had entranced him the second their eyes had met; the sparkle in her smile and the smell of her perfume, lilacs mixed with summer beaches, dancing toward him on a cool New England breeze. Even now, he could smell it, smell *her*. Without another thought, he slipped the visor unit on. The lights came to life as his eyes fluttered closed and a familiar feeling of momentary dislocation overcame over him. Then, he slipped out of this world and into the Neuroscape, another angel-headed hipster, burning for the heavenly connection.

3 - Down The Rabbit-Hole

The NeuroGlass unit was gone from his head. He was standing in a wide field of glittering, unblemished snow, the bitter wind cutting like a scalpel. It was night here, wherever here was. He had programmed the system to orient his avatar near to wherever Alicia’s was . . . so wherever here was, she had to be somewhere close by. An engorged, pregnant moon hung suspended in the sky above a skein of cottony, purple-velvet clouds. Gnarled, dead trees dotted the landscape, like witch-fingers clawing their way out of graves. The hillocks of glimmering snow seemed to go on forever, endlessly winding into the distance. He looked down, and found himself dressed in what his avatar was always dressed in: Red frock coat, boots, leather leggings, and a cutlass; a white silk shirt with an ascot; a wide-brimmed hat with a feather sticking out of it. Noonian thought it looked ridiculous. He was right—it did. And, that was sort of the point; the Neuroscape allowed him a rare opportunity to let his hair down, so to speak, to let his inner child out of its cage . . . free, for a time, from Noonian and his plots, his schemes, his madness.

He shivered, and pulled his coat tighter. He closed his eyes and tried to “think” the world around him into something warmer, perhaps something more tropical. It didn’t work. Perhaps the controls were locked to Alicia; it would make perfect sense if they were.

He caught the movement out of the corner of his eye—the swirl of a shadowy cloak, the snicker of dark laughter. But as soon as he turned to look, the cloaked figure had fled . . . bleeding back into the black of the night. Noonian. He was here, with him. A sudden tingle of fear went up Victor's spine, as he considered the implications of that . . . if Noonian was here, then he too had an avatar; he could inflict actual physical harm on him, on Pris. On Alicia. He would have to be careful. Watchful.

About fifty yards in front of him lay a decaying stone tower that looked like a bent and tortured lighthouse, a wrinkled stone sword erupting up out of the crystalline snow. What remained of a balcony was wrapped around the uppermost section of the tower. Behind the balcony sat a set of tall, angular glass doors that wrapped around the tower's circumference. The glass in the doors was cracked here and there, and spiders had spun webs between the metal sills.

"Why would she choose *this?*" he wondered aloud. "Pris, maybe . . .?" No, he shook his head; Pris wouldn't have conjured up such a dreary, dreadful place. Pris was fond of neon-drenched, leopard-spotted rock 'n roll fantasies filled with motorcycles and lingerie, screaming guitars and wild-eyed adolescent dreams. Apocalyptic winter vistas weren't her style.

"But they *were* Alicia's," he thought aloud, thinking of the wintry Norman Rockwell paintings she'd hung up in their first apartment. Again, it made sense: If he and Pris had done things right, then Alicia would be both the main architect and sole inhabitant of this particular "headspace," to use the parlance of the Neuroscape. Her consciousness itself would supply the psychotronic constructs for it, and the Neuroscape's built-in software would do the rest.

"*Gah!*" he cried out in surprise, and stumbled backward as the base of the crooked, stone tower began to shift and move. The stones rearranged themselves like pieces of a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, and an angular, gothic archway yawned open at the base of the tower. Warm candlelight flickered within, illuminating a winding stone staircase that led upward, with a wrought-iron railing beside it.

Then, he noticed, something else: The entire tower—and every "stone" block that comprised it—was now made out of sanded, finely stained wood. Every craggy, aged blemish on every block had been meticulously painted or carved with an obsessive eye for detail. Victor felt his heartbeat quicken. What else—whom else—could it be but Alicia, beckoning him closer?

He walked toward the tower, never minding the cold and the snow crunching and yielding under his feet. He could feel ice-cold water splatter his ankle and seep through his socks. When he reached the base of the tower, it took his eyes a second to recognize the visual trick being played on him—the inside of the tower was bigger than the outside. Hundreds of candles in elaborate, curlycue labrum lit the gloom. He stepped inside—it was warm, a welcome shelter from the cold outside—and bathed in the blue half-light of the moon and the warm glow of candlelight, he beheld the grand staircase: hundreds of steps and levels, thrown together into a haphazard recreation of M.C. Escher that would've seemed cartoonish were it not for the unrelenting realness of it all.

Then, a shudder spider-walked up his spine as he heard her voice:

"Victor, *Victor* . . ." came the words, a creeping echo. "Victor, come to me."

"Alicia," he heard himself whisper. Her name felt heavy on his lips, and its talismanic power galvanized what steel his spine had to offer. And so, he began to climb.

4 - *Nightmare Fuel*

As he reached the next landing, he stopped, short of breath and wheezing. He craned his neck upward, and saw he had only one more flight to go. The staircase had changed three or four times by now, pieces of it—usually the piece he was standing on—suddenly swinging left or right to connect with some other piece; he'd nearly lost his balance and fallen the first time it occurred, but had quickly gotten the hang of “riding” the stairs as they locked into place, like slow-moving stone dominos connecting mysterious cause to mysterious effect. He also could not shake the feeling that he was being followed . . . and he knew exactly who it was, too. Noonian, coming after him. Sweat dripping from his brow—was his actual body sweating, back in the lab? An interesting question—he began to climb faster.

There was one final flight. But no sooner had he commanded his foot to move—movement was a conscious effort of will in the Neuroscape; it took getting used to but one could become quite good at it—he heard Pris's voice, coming from behind him.

“Father.”

He turned, and saw her, for the very first time. Slender, petite, big blue eyes. She was beautiful . . . in a weird, retro sort of way, though to a father, her mode of dress was somewhat alarming. She wearing a black leather miniskirt with matching silk stockings and high-heeled, neon-crimson leather boots. She wore a bright pink tank top with an emerald-green heart painted on the breast, entwined in white barbed wire, and a wrinkled black leather jacket, its lapels and left sleeve festooned with an armada of gleaming, silvery studs. She wore her bleach-blond hair puffed out like the business end of a witch's broomstick. Her skin was a milky pale, her lips a bright purple, and her matching, purple-airbrushed eyes made her look like a raccoon that gotten into a style-fight with a twentieth-century punk rock band.

“My God, look at you!” he said, and grinned despite himself. “Pris, you look *wonderful!* I must say, I am *impressed*, love.”

“Thank you,” she said, and smiled, but her smile soon faltered. “You missed the pregnancy.”

“Pregnancy . . .?” he shook his head. “I don't understand.”

“Well, yes, Father,” she said. “Everything's a *metaphor* in the Neuroscape . . . you know that. I was pregnant with . . . with mother . . . or what I *thought* was mother . . . if only for a few minutes. But here, minutes can be months. It . . . wasn't an easy birth.” She looked away from him, her gaze troubled. “No, not easy at *all*.”

“You mean to tell me . . .” he said, unable to keep from gasping aloud, “that your *avatar* was literally *pregnant* with her? Fascinating . . .!” The implications were staggering; there was a mountain of metaphor here that he wasn't sure he completely comprehended; it just went to show that the system, if left to its own devices—which it *had* to be to create something like Pris, or to bring the dead back to life—could do some pretty queer things. His face no doubt betraying his mind's attempt to unravel it all, he said, partly to himself, “I . . . I had no idea that the system could carry things that . . . *far*. Tell me, what . . . what was it *like*? I mean, are you being *metaphorical* when you say you gave birth to her, or—?”

“Oh no, father. I’m being quite literal,” she said, and averted her eyes, and shivered. She put a hand on her stomach and shook her head, and smiled with what seemed to be great effort. “You should’ve been there for it,” she said. Her smile vanished. “I was . . . and it hurt. Father, it hurt so awfully *bad*.”

“I’m . . . sure it did,” he said, his mind whirling with theories, ideas; he couldn’t help it. But, he sensed that there was a connotative meaning here that he wasn’t quite getting. “But how were you . . . you know . . . able to be up and walking so soon?”

“A second is a year to a computer, unless humans are involved,” she said. “I have to slow way down just to be able to perceive you, talk to you. But the birth felt like it took ages. I think, dad, that in cases like this, time is liquid and just is what it needs to be. But like I said . . . it hurt. Brutally. Worse than all the pregnancy books say it does. I’ve never known pain like that. And I knew the minute the medical A.I.’s avatar handed . . . *it* to me.” She shuddered, and looked and sounded as though she was going to vomit. “That’s what I came to tell you. The . . . *thing* I gave birth to. When I first saw it, I screamed so loud the whole Neuroscape must’ve heard me. It looked . . . like an abortion that hadn’t died all the way.” She was shivering. “It crawled away from me on *six legs*, Father. Those legs . . . that *face* . . . I’ll never forget it, any of it. It’s *burned* into my memory.”

“*Victor* . . .” came Alicia’s voice, waltzing down the stairs from above. “Victor darling, where *are* you?”

“Father,” said Pris. Her gaze was grim and foreboding. She grabbed by the arm. “Don’t go up there. Please.”

“And just why the hell not?” He blinked, taken aback by the fear in her eyes, the reticence in her voice. This was very out of character for Pris; she was always so eager to please, and so very carefree in manner and bearing. She had talked incessantly about Alicia these past few months, mythologizing her memory of a woman she’d never known in a way that was downright touching, affecting . . . and above all, human. “Why, Pris? She’s *waiting* for me up there. My *wife* . . . your *mother* . . . is right up those stairs. Right there. *Waiting*. I’m sure that whatever you saw was just—”

“No,” said Pris, shaking her head. “Something went *wrong*, Father. I . . . Listen,” she said, and put a gentle hand on his chest, “I know the pain you’ve gone through, all these years. It’s in your voice every day, and it’s carved into you like the features of some gargoyle. And, I think that just as all of yours and Alicia’s passions for science, medicine, and each other somehow went into creating *me*, well, all the tears and grief and . . . *rage* locked inside of you somehow went into *her*. So please, Father. *Dad* . . . don’t go up there.” She was shivering, and her eyes were pleading, entreating him.

“Pris,” he began, “we’ve worked *so hard* for this moment. I *can’t* just let it go—”

“No,” she said, “you don’t understand. Mother isn’t *mother*, she’s—”

“Pris. We’re *scientists*, you and I.” He could feel himself getting angry now. He turned around quickly at the sound of footfalls scuttling behind him. Noonian was growing closer. But no matter. He had waited *too long* for this moment, too long indeed, and he was not going to be stopped by the irrational fears of a piece of software—daughter or not. Yet instead of putting her in her place, he heard himself entreating, pleading with her. “Pris, we *have* to see this through! For the sake of science if not for my sake!”

“No, *you’re* the scientist and *you* have to see this though!” she said, raising her voice and stepping closer. He could smell her perfume; it had been Alicia’s favorite. “I’m just along for the ride. Hell, you probably only created *me* as a prototype!”

“That’s not true!” he yelled as he lied to her.

“It *is!*” she cried. “Now goddamn it, turn *back*, Father! I’m *telling* you that what’s up there isn’t—”

“I *CAN’T!*” he roared, the words exploding out of him. His chest burned, and his face felt hot. From somewhere close by, he heard Noonian’s dark laughter echo. He turned back to Pris and said, “If you were really alive, you’d understand.” It sounded colder than he’d meant it to.

She slapped him then, hard and crisp and quick across the cheek, so forcefully that he stumbled backward a few steps. In a flash of reeling terror, he found himself teetering on the very edge of the staircase landing. The stairs beneath him swooshed to the side as the staircase suddenly began to move, and he felt himself lose purchase . . .

Pris shot out a hand, grabbed him, and pulled him back to his feet. He steadied himself, heaving for breath, his heart hammering. The brilliant crimson mark she’d left on his cheek still stung. For a moment he just stood there, his mouth hanging open, more shocked and hurt and frightened than anything.

“I’m as alive as you *made me*,” she said in a flat, even tone. “And don’t you *ever* forget just how *human* I am. I might be a brain in a box without a body, but I *do* have a heart, one that *doesn’t* want to see you get hurt. And father—*daddy*—the thing that’s . . . *lurking* up there . . . it isn’t your Alicia. *Trust* me on that. *Please.*”

“Thank you for saving me, Pris,” he said quietly, straightening his clothes. Pris wouldn’t be this frightened without a reason, and yet still, he found he could not simply turn back or give up. Not after all these years, after so many failures and so many tears. “But I’m going to see my wife now, if you please.” He turned around and started to slowly ascend the last of the stairs; the door to the top of the tower was close. It looked above, a soft glow emanating from the crack underneath it.

“Father—” she said softly, grabbing his arm again.

“*Yes?* What *now?*” he snapped. He could feel himself getting angry again. His avatar flickered for a moment. For a brief second, he was no longer wearing the red frock coat and leather leggings, but instead a tuxedo and a long black cape, and a ceramic mask over half of his face. He could feel its cold touch on his skin, felt his facial muscles contort into a sneer, and he heard himself snicker darkly . . . Noonian’s laugh, low and sinister. “What’s the matter Pris?” he felt and heard himself hiss, a quiet menace boiling beneath the inflection of every word. “Afraid of what demons we might have conjured forth?” Pris took a step away; she looked worried, frightened. Then, his operatic getup vanished; he regained control over his face and voice, and his clothing returned to normal. He blinked. “Pris . . . Listen, I—we *can’t* give up now. I *must* see this through to the end. I simply *must.*”

“At the very least,” she said in a small, faraway voice, “take me with you.”

It took him a minute, but eventually he softened—he couldn’t take looking at those plaintive, deep-green eyes for so long; they were so inarguably human and full of torment—and he felt himself relax. He extended a hand to her. “Wouldn’t have it any other way. Now, come on. There’s nothing to be afraid of. You’ll see. We’ll go see her together, and everything will be fine.” Pris still looked extremely hesitant. Sweat stood out on her brow. “Come on. *Please* Pris. I *have* to do this. I *can’t* just let it go.”

Tentatively at first, then with strength and confidence, Pris took the hand he offered, and offered him a thin smile. Her skin felt warm and soft and real; he could feel her pulse

beneath the flesh of her wrist. She pulled closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder as they ascended the stairs, her gaze troubled and her face an ashen wasteland of dread.

“I’m glad we’re walking the last mile together, Father,” she said, and squeezed his arm. “But I hope you’ll see for yourself when we get there . . . and *run*.”

“Shh,” he said, patting her hand. “No more of that, now. Let’s go.”

And so in silence, they ascended the last of the stairs together. Echoes of their footsteps seemed to follow them—Noonian. That was all right, though . . . Victor was determined not to let his alter ruin things. He could follow all he wanted, as far as Victor was concerned. He *was* a bit worried that here, in this headspace, Noonian had tangible, physical form. With a body all his own—even if it was only an avatar—Noonian was theoretically capable of great destruction. No, scratch that—not theoretically, *probably*. Explaining him to Alicia was one conversation with he was definitely not looking forward to. He realized then that he was already planning out what to say to her, how he was going to say it, etcetera, as though she *hadn’t* been in asleep for twenty years, as if she hadn’t dreamt away the past two decades . . . in short, it was too late not to get his hopes up, for they were, presently, as high as the stars themselves. There was no turning back now, no matter how much Pris might want him to. No, there was no turning back.

Victor soon found himself in an uncomfortably familiar place. Waves of nostalgia and creepy, crystal-clear memories washed over him as he stepped from the stairs . . . and into his and his old friends’ laboratory at Wenzel University, the lab in which, all those years ago, he and Walther and Joseph and Alicia had first concocted the mutagenic serum; the lab in which Alicia had first injected herself, the night that everything had started to go wrong. The lab looked as though it hadn’t been used in some time: Everywhere, spiders spun gossamer tapestries in spindly labyrinths of arcane, wizardly glassware and antennae; candle-flames sputtered beneath flasks that held bubbling liquids; eldritch sparks flared between the bright metal poles of machines; a long metal table in the center of the room was suspiciously unoccupied by any machinery save for a metal helmet at one end; gleaming golden sparks burst out of the contact-points now and then, and smoke rose from the coiled wires that ran from them. Menacing clamps were positioned around the table’s outer perimeter; the cables running from it snaked down and away and into the shadows. The hum of electricity, the smell of ozone, and the clickity-clack of overloaded circuit-breakers filled the air. Except for the bubbling of the glassware and the zapping of the machinery, a potent silence lurked in the air . . . as if the room itself was breathing oh-so-slowly, waiting for some penultimate moment to arrive.

There, in the corner, sat a small wooden table. On it sat a perfect facsimile of that little wooden picture frame he’d finished for her. But apart from that, the room appeared abandoned; it was if someone had left the lights on and had simply walked away.

“Father, I don’t like this,” said Pris, and clutched his arm tighter.

“Can you . . . influence any of this, Pris?” he asked, a tiny seed of fear beginning to grow into a thorny, twisted rosebush deep in the pit of his stomach. Pris had been right—there was something wrong here. Deep in his head, he knew that Noonian could feel it to. For the first time in a long time, Victor sensed that he was afraid. He cleared his throat. “You should be able to. After all, you’re *part* of this world . . . connected to it on a fundamental level.”

Pris cocked her head to one side, as might a curious cat inspecting a fish tank, then closed her eyes and furrowed her brow in concentration. Nothing happened. She opened her eyes and sighed.

"I don't think so," she said, shaking her head. "Not the setting she's chosen, at least. Maybe other things, but I can't tell. If I had more time to hack the code she's written, then probably. No, *definitely*. But something tells me I *don't* have time . . . that neither of us do."

"Hmm," he said. "That worries me." It was the understatement of the year. He hadn't noticed until now, but they were both talking in hushed tones, as though they were afraid that someone—or something—might hear them. "All right Pris, I'm disengaging; you were right . . . this *isn't* right." Towering waves of disappointment crashed over his soul. He sighed a heavy sigh. "I'll unplug, and we'll see if we can dig through the code together later, maybe figure out what went wrong."

He reached up toward his temples, and pinched his fingers together in the space just before his ears, and then brought his hands forward. Normally, this gesture was the universal symbol for "log out," which should have taken him out of the simulation immediately and returned him to the real world . . . except that now, it did nothing.

We're trapped, he thought, and felt a slight surge of panic. Deep in his head, Noonian panicked too. It was odd; Victor had never known his alter to feel actual *panic*, even in extreme situations. But, he was certainly panicking now. It was the panic of a trapped animal doped up on stimulants, the deranged panic of the lunatic. Victor could feel him there, railing at the edges of his subconscious, screaming to him to get out. That there was danger here, and that they should run, as far and fast as his legs would carry them. Except, of course, they couldn't run; not from the fabric of their own minds.

Now more frightened and annoyed than disappointed, Victor said, "Oh, to *hell* with this." Then, in a loud voice, he cried out, "*Alicia!* Can you hear me? I know you're here . . . show yourself already!"

"I'm *here*," came a flinty, hissing voice from the furthest of the shadows. "Right where you *put* me . . . my *love*."

Victor's mouth went dry and fell open and spine-liquefying terror flooded into his veins as he saw, from out of the shadows, there crawl a twelve-foot-long, scorpion-like monstrosity, its stinger-tail twitching, its shiny black exoskeleton gleaming in the half-light. He felt his bladder let go, and something inside him curdled and shrank. The woeful thing's head—*Alicia's* head, he realized—was translucent, its pulsating brain visible within. Its face—her face, once so beautiful—split open in a wild, unhinged grin, a massacre of fangs. Rancid black ichor dribbled from her gums, her sharp fangs and long, snapping tongue swimming in it; smoke rose from the floor from where it dripped. Her eyes were bugged-out and enlarged, her gaze drilling into him like an icy lance, the lids blinking sideways. Beneath its—her—eyes, there lay a mass of long, quivering tentacles that made a wet slurping sound as they scraped against the wood of the floor. Others writhed in the air before the monster, like sinister feelers. They were coated in a thin layer of mucus. On top of its head, there sat a cybernetic receptacle of some kind; some unholy interface between this terrible, godforsaken thing—*Dear gods, what has become of her*, he thought; *What have I done?*—and the machinery surrounding them.

"I told you," whispered Pris. "Something happened. Something *bad*."

"Dear . . . *God*," he whispered hoarsely, his eyes riveted to the mind-twisting monstrosity of hideousness before him. What had gone wrong, and how? How had he created this . . . this *thing*? Surely such a beast did not exist within the skull of his beloved; surely this could not have sprung forth from *her*.

“Alicia . . .?” he began in a hoarse whisper, a full-body shiver escaping him. Dear God, what had he done?

“Birth defects,” said Pris. “When it was born, its screams rang out in harmony with mine . . . and for only a brief second . . . it sounded like she did. Then the sound changed . . . it was . . . well, I really can’t describe it.”

From within him—then from behind him—he heard his own voice, speaking in awed tones and in a faux-English accent, just like always: “She’s *beautiful*, isn’t she?”

He and Pris both turned, and saw Noonian lurking there in the doorway, the light from without silhouetting him and his flourishing opera-cape.

“*You*,” said Victor, accusingly, clenching his fists. “You did this. How can even *you* look on this and think it ‘beautiful?’ You loved Alicia just as much as I! Why do this to her!”

“Why, my dear Victor, never fear! Though *you*, pretty one . . . *you* can and *should* fear me.” He chuckled sinisterly, darkly. “I’ve done *nothing* to our Alicia, Victor; why, not a thing at *all*! No . . . Alicia is still sound asleep in the coffin you and I designed for her, just as she has been these twenty years. Consciousness is not a liquid that one pours from one flask to another, Victor! You should know better! Consciousness is an . . . an *image*, or an *impression*, if you like . . . one cannot ‘transfer’ it. No, one only hope to *reproduce* it, by way of the employment of some other, *less precise* medium. As we have done here, my friend.”

“No!” shouted Victor, gesturing to the creature. “*This* is not Alicia! This isn’t even a *shadow* of Alicia! This . . . this is *sick*!”

Noonian only grinned, his eyes twinkling behind the opera mask. “To some. But to me, it is a beautiful *meeting* of minds.”

“I should’ve known,” said Pris. “Noonian—is that your name? It isn’t it? I can tell when it’s father and when it’s you, you know. You are a *plague* in his mind. And only a mind as *twisted* as yours could ever come up with something like this.”

“Not *my* mind,” said Noonian. Behind them, the creature skittered and lumbered back and forth across the floor, eyeing them hungrily. And yet, it stayed its vicious, tentacled maw, its lobster-like pincers. Why, he wondered? Noonian sighed, and went on. “You see Victor, it’s time I came clean with you. For the past several months—unbeknownst to you, and mostly while you’ve *thought* you’ve been asleep—I have, by the careful application of rituals found in certain ancient texts, been in communion with certain . . . *agencies* that are of a non-terrestrial nature. To say that these agencies are *extraterrestrial* would be to mislead you, for they are not from any world that finds its home within the confines of our familiar four dimensions. No, these . . . *agencies* are very interested in our planet, for it would appear that they *originated* here, millions of our years ago. Thus, of course, proving some of my—and your—‘wilder’ theories about the early days of the human genome. But I digress. These agencies, which originated here long ago, are interested in, well, *reclaiming* it. But from where they dwell, they can only touch the *surface* of our world, influence it in certain ways. Thoughts. *Dreams*. They cannot cross over in any meaningful way. But ah . . . in *abstract* ways . . . that they can manage. By itself, this ‘Neuroscape’ construct is a perfect way for them to go from *there* . . . to *here*. And now, I’ve given it to them. Our Alicia’s consciousness was the perfect vehicle, carrying one of their kind over from their world into *this* world, virtual though it might be. And now, they can begin the process of figuring out how leap from their *avatars* . . . into human *hosts*.” He snickered and folded his arms; he seemed pleased with himself. “Call this . . . *version* of our Alicia a *first experiment*. It is, after all, what she always wanted . . . to transcend her humanity, to be more than human.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s *insane*,” said Pris. “Mother would’ve never wanted *this*. And—ancient magic? *Rituals*? Sounds more like a bunch of *woo-woo* than science, if you ask me.”

“Gaze upon the results yourself, my dear girl!” laughed Noonian, and gestured to the monstrosity clicking its jaws behind them, its acidic drool eating smoking holes in the floor. Whenever its shadow fell upon him, Victor felt small and cold and afraid, like a child hiding from . . . well, from *monsters*. He sensed that the creature was waiting for something—but for what? Its towering over them, holding back, hovering like that—and his not being able to read those blazing, inhuman eyes set in this twisted mockery of Alicia’s face—made Victor more than nervous; it made him tremble. Still, he tried to put on a brave front. The scientist in him wondered: Was it possible that Noonian really had done such a thing as he claimed? His—*their*—theories on the earliest beginnings of life allowed for the possibility that before one of the past six major extinction events, there had existed a form of life quite unlike anything found on Earth today. And of course, as a scientist, he had always been open to the possibility of extraterrestrial life . . . but this? And what of all this talk of arcane rituals, of mystical rites? He was tempted to dismiss it all as poppycock, except . . . this was *Noonian* he was thinking of. Noonian, the part of him that had always been incisive and insightful, the part of him that had fallen in love with science, jacked into an amplifier and turned up to eleven. He wasn’t sure the man’s ego would *let* him to lie about something like this. Whether it was actually true, one thing *was* certain—from the look in Noonian’s eyes, he believed it.

Cautiously, Victor took a protective step in front of Pris. “And what of *you*, Noonian? Assuming that I *believe* such a claim, how do you—or *I*—fit into this mad, ludicrous plan of yours? What did they give *you* in exchange for your assistance?”

At first, Noonian only grinned. His eyes twinkled again, like dark, malignant stars. “Why, my dear boy, I thought you’d *never* ask! Very well, if you must know. They promised to find a way to give me a body of my own . . . an existence beyond our *shared* fleshy body. Their science is, as you can imagine, much more advanced than our own. Merely . . . *limited* in certain areas. But by augmenting *their* wisdom with *our* tech, and *our* bodies with *their minds*, whole new vistas of evolutionary possibility will open up before us! Think of it, Victor! Walther Roentgen’s serum is *peanuts* compared to what they offer!”

Victor shook his head, and clenched his fists. “No. What Walther and I created was an *abomination*, Noonian.”

“An abomination that *you and I* have both benefitted from, Victor. Remember that. Your thinning hair back in the ‘real’ world is a reminder of that.”

“Taking the serum was *your* idea, Noonian! And so is this . . . this *monstrousness!*”

“Ah well,” sighed Noonian, and shook his head. “I thought you’d see it that way. But I had to try, didn’t I?”

What happened next happened so fast, so suddenly, that—later—he would tell himself there was no way it could’ve been stopped. One minute, Noonian’s hand was empty; the next, it held a three-dimensional wireframe drawing made of light that appeared in a bright flash, its edges filling-in with solid matter, as though it were being “drawn” into existence. Black metal gleamed. A revolver. Noonian raised the gun, took aim, and fired—at Pris. She cried out and stumbled back, clutching her abdomen as blood gushed between her fingers. Behind her, the creature chattered maniacally and danced on its scorpion-legs, a malicious grin spread across its twisted, Alicia-like features as it tittered. A few seconds later, Pris’s

body flickered and flashed, becoming first a pixelated mesh of light and then dissipating in a flurry of three-dimensional sparks, vaporizing into the aether of the Neuroscape.

“NO!” Victor cried, and fell to his knees. The floorboards beneath hit them hard enough to scrape, even beneath the leather leggings. Then, as the tentacles constricted around his chest, he began to whimper, tears spilling down his cheeks, the greatest scientific mind in over a century reduced to blubbering like a frightened child as the thing slammed him down onto the long metal worktable. Locking clamps fastened tight around his wrists and ankles, pinning him spread-eagled. A moment later the tentacles uncurled from around him and retreated, and in a terribly sudden stretch of slow-ebbing seconds, the thing was looming over him and leering at him, its wretched gaze penetrating his very soul. He tried to shut his eyes as he lay shivering, but the unending horror of the thing’s satanic countenance would not be denied its slice of madness; it remained, grinning down at him. It leered at him over a train-wreck of teeth and fangs that oozed black ichor. He fell quiet, his simpering pleas lost to the terror. With three dripping tentacles, the monster reached above his head; he felt the cold metal of the helmet clamp down around his skull. A spark popped just above his eyes, the flash momentarily blinding him. Soon though, the creature’s monstrous face swam back into view, and he wished he’d remained sightless. Meanwhile, its tentacles worked a set of switches on a nearby control panel. He could feel small tingles stinging his scalp.

“What *are* you?” he whispered, unsure that he really wanted to know. “Where do you *come* from?”

The thing craned its head to the rafters, casting its gaze skyward. Then, it turned back to face him and uttered a single word that sent fresh shivers through his bones: “*Outside.*” Then, as if elaborating, it added, “Beyond . . . Elsewhere . . . *Away.*”

“What do you *want* of me?” he asked, trembling. “Whatever it is, I swear—”

“*Life,*” it said. “To live within.” It tapped a tentacle to his chest. “To *ascend.*”

To live within, to ascend, he thought, and tried to suppress a shudder. He watched as its tentacles reached beyond his field of vision, and then came back grasping a large thick cable with a menacing-looking plug on one end. He watched in horrified fascination as it attached the cable to the receptacle on its head. His vision blurred for a second as a powerful shock reverberated through his scalp and skull. The water cleared from his eyes, and as the disorienting pain passed, and he understood: The creature did not want to remain in the Neuroscape; it wanted out, out into the greater, realer world of flesh-and-blood physicality. And it intended to use *him* as the bridge. Yes, that had to be it; the monster wanted to overwrite his mind with its own, and escape into the real world inside his body. With his money, power, and corporate connections, his celebrity status, and access to his scientific knowledge, such a twisted thing would have the power to shape the world in its own terrible image. *If only,* he thought, half-incoherently, his brain-cells exploding with terror. *If only I had more time, time to study the thing; time to understand what Noonian has done here, time to fix it. Fix her.*

The machines to his left began to hum and whine, and that feeling of electroshock vertigo returned. Something told him that a connection had been made; he and this monstrosity were now linked via some awful, existential network connection to the soul. Where was Noonian? Where had he disappeared to? If his consciousness was to be overwritten by this monster, then *surely* Noonian’s would be erased, too. A small blessing, then. But he knew Noonian all-too-well, and he himself had probably realized—and planned for, somehow—just that possibility.

He could, theoretically, make a back-up of his mind inside the Neuroscape, similar to what I tried to do with Alicia. But if it didn't work for her . . . No. No doubt Noonian had *known* it wouldn't work from the start, which was why he had been so quiet all through the preparations . . . because he had either *known* that the experiment would fail—at least, the way Victor had been doing it—or because he had somehow seized control when Victor wasn't looking and had sabotaged it, somehow, no doubt in order to set the stage for this very moment's arrival. Desperate, Victor decided to try a last-ditch effort, a Hail Mary play that probably wouldn't work . . . though at this point, what did he have to lose?

"Alicia?" he said softly, his voice trembling.

The creature reared back as if struck. Blinking as though dazed or surprised, it stopped what it was doing and studied him carefully, its alien eyes darting to and fro as it did. There was something in its gaze he found mesmerizing . . . something haunting, something terrifyingly human. Presently the creature's gaze left him, and fell upon the little wooden picture frame that sat near the table. Almost gingerly, the creature reached over and picked it up in its tentacles, grasping it delicately, and examined it. It carefully turned it over, end over end, its sideways-blinking inspecting it, as though it had awakened some dim memory within the monster's head. Its face held bemused confusion, as though it were distantly and vaguely remembering something lost and faraway.

It's working, he thought. God help me, it's working.

"Vic . . . *tor* . . . ?" the creature croaked slowly, softly. It turned its baleful, alien gaze toward him. And there in its eyes was, of all things, a kind of innocently bewildered confusion. Its vicious maw of fangs fell into a troubled frown, its eyes suddenly pleading with him . . . perhaps for death; such would've been a mercy, after all . . .

"Alicia! Oh, *Alicia!*" he said, laughing despite the grim circumstances. "Christ in heaven, *it is you!* You *are* in there!"

The monster reached out with a single tentacle and gingerly touched his hand. *Please, kill me,* the look in its eyes begged, entreated.

"Alicia . . ."

Their reunion was all-too-brief, though, for at that very moment he heard a battle-cry loosed in a familiar voice: "*Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!*"

"Pris, *NO!*" he heard himself scream, as a gleaming, silvery sword with Celtic blade-markings suddenly erupted out of the alien's chest with a thick slicing sound, splattering him with pus and blood and thin tendrils of pulsating viscera. The creature, a look of utter shock and horror upon its craven face, gazed down and wrapped its tentacles around the sword, shudders moving through its body; it dropped the picture frame, which shattered into splinters as it hit the floor. Bright sword sticking through its midsection, the creature turned, and there behind it stood Pris. She wore a silver armor, and held a bloody sword. Three muscular tentacles shot out, seized her, and lifted her into the air, slithering their way up her armor-plated arms, slicking their way around her waist and legs. Another tentacle snaked out and wrapped itself around her neck. The monster opened its mouth wide, its tentacles writhing like pythons. Their tips split apart into tiny mouths, each ringed with fangs. Victor saw and heard Pris scream as set of those sharp incisors bit into her neck, clamping down like a vice.

5 - *Fight And Flight*

Pris cried out as a second tentacle punched through the metal of her armor as though it were tinfoil—a tiny burst of television-static crackled and washed over her body as the monster hacked Pris’s code—and a second tiny mouth latched onto her arm, its thorny fangs scissoring her skin open as though it were naught but cheap fabric. She saw and felt the crimson rivulets spill down the silver of her armor. She threw back her head and screamed with all the fury of a harpy, the agony far greater than she had anticipated. Pain in the Neuroscape was as real as anything else, one’s avatar was wired to one’s nervous system—even if that nervous system was, in and of itself, virtual. The reason she couldn’t just hack the base-code of the Neuroscape and “erase” the creature—and she knew, for she’d tried—was because the system did not work that way . . . she had been lucky to reconstitute her avatar before her program had terminated, luckier still to command the Neuroscape to reconfigure it the way she had. That, and there was something . . . unique about the monster’s relationship to the outside world . . . How or why that made a difference, Pris had no clue. All she knew was that it made one.

The carnal hunger for righteous violence against the monster that had dared to hurt her Father growled within her like a tiger trying to claw its way out of her bones, and she even *attempt* to hide the ferocious glee she took in seeing the damnable thing bleed; its virtual blood was a metaphor for the program code that comprised it, the wounds in its flesh a memory leak that would soon cause its program to crash and de-rez . . . it would be gone for good, then. Unfortunately, so would she. What became of digital souls, when and if they ceased to run inside their home-circuitry? Father was an atheist, she knew, and did not approve of her sometimes-supernatural ideations. But Pris liked to think that there was more to the world than just the circuits of the Neuroscape, more to her existence than virtual metaphor. Perhaps she would be reborn in the real world, as a *real girl* . . .

She had shoved the sword through the soft tissue between the plates of the creature’s hard, gleaming shell, and she had heard it scream out in stomach-curdling agony. Despite the pain, she grinned from ear to ear with the ferocity and glory of the heat of battle, the warmth of bloodshed, as the creature’s tentacle-mouths bit into her, tried to strangle her, and pulled her ever-closer to its gaping, terrifying maw. She had to *do* something, and quick.

If I hacked the system before, I can do it again, she thought. Then, without thought, she closed her eyes, and stretched out her feelings. She couldn’t hack the system to a large enough degree to override the monster’s existence, but perhaps she could again change something about herself . . . but what? Then, she hit upon an idea.

Now, she command her avatar’s body, *fly! Gods-damn you, fly! FLY! Anything is possible here, so FLY! GODS-DAMN IT, FLY OR DIE!*

She forced herself to imagine wings, like those of faeries . . . she pictured them sprouting out of her back, unfolding like twin bony parasols, and no sooner did she think it than the metal of her armor groaned and buckled in the rear and then exploded outward, sending shrapnel flying as her newly forged wings burst forth. She could feel the muscles in them stretch out as they unfurled, all leathery and gossamer and full of raw power. Her body lunged upward and backward as she commanded her new musculature to flap harder and yank higher as the creature’s tentacles tensed and pulled and tried to draw her back. She felt

her new wing-muscles strain and tighten; they burned and stung; pain was a relatively new concept for her, and in a strange way, she relished it. To feel was to live. Most of her emotional experience had been a do-it-yourself project; she had gone out carousing around the Neuroscape without telling Father, using her avatar to meet human men; she'd engaged them in conversation, at first with the naiveté of a child, but then with growing confidence and skill. She had shed her clothes for one of them and had borne bright beads of sweat on her cool, bare breasts and arching, candlelit back during their molten-chrome lovemaking. And she had done it all with the zeal of a career hedonist. No pain, however great, came close to what love felt like. And it was for love now she fought, for love that she used the power of her wings to stretch and snap the alien monster's tentacles, and it was for love that she endured the pain.

Her wounds stung and bled. The tentacles and their fangs had dug into her like rusty crucifixion-nails. She could feel blood issue from the wounds in perfect time to her heartbeat—such a new thing, so fleeting. This thing, with its tentacles and their swallowing, suckling mouths full of teeth and now her blood, was nothing her father could have ever created; no, this came from *outside*, from Elsewhere. The Bad Man who father sometimes became had been telling the truth. And, it was about to eat her whole if she didn't pull away even harder still. She flapped her wings faster. The tentacle-teeth dug in deeper. Her muscles felt on the precipice of collapse—virtual or not, they were hers, and she had barely ever used them; now, she mourned their imminent demise. She gritted her teeth. The combined pains in her wings, arms, legs, and back forced her to cry out. But, she kept fighting, the strain on her muscles multiplying, the torture increasing as the tentacles dug in deeper.

Then, two of the tentacles snapped, and the creature screamed. Pris yanked her wrist free, reached down to her left hip, and closed her eyes and concentrated, throwing the entire force of her will into molding and manipulating the Neuroscape codebase; flashes of program logic appeared to her behind her eyelids. And then . . .

Her searching hand found the newly minted ray gun. She could feel the program logic as she rewrote it with her mind; she bent all her virtual will into psychically reprogramming it, hacking it beyond what she'd ever thought possible. Then she opened her eyes. She was done. The streams of particles that the gun fired would now be more than just fancy visual effects or an instant log-out of the entity they struck. No, now, they would be metaphors for a generative-algorithm meta-virus, one capable of chewing through virtual-synapses with rapid and deadly scrambling power.

Without another thought, Pris wrenched the heavy gun free of its holster, aimed it at the creature's translucent head, right between its eyes, and fired.

6 - Death And Rebirth

Between the instant that Pris fired the gun and the instant Victor turned to shield his eyes, there was a tiny splice of time in which he saw the monster's screaming face as the gun's rays hit it. That brief half-a-second would be forever burned into his memory, as would the wailing, bloodcurdling scream of pain that gurgled up out of the creature's throat. The bright particle-stream's incandescence seared the skin off its face, the sparks and flames

eating their way across its ichorous, skull-grinning countenance, frying away its features and causing its eyes to pop like eggs full of jelly. A tidal wave of hot, wet, crimson-shimmering blood splashed across his red frock coat and leather leggings. The rancid reek of barbecued sewage filled his nostrils. Flaming chunks of boiling flesh and chunks of steaming entrails blasted out of the monster's smoldering carcass as it exploded, a volcano of sinewy gristle and red viscera.

And then, seconds after the horror had begun, it ended. Silence and the stench of charbroiled monster-meat reigned supreme. Victor opened one eye, took a look around, then opened the other. Pris was standing about ten feet away, swaying on her feet; she was still in her armor, but her once-powerful wings now hung from the bone in ragged tatters of torn flesh. The light shining from the stairwell behind her, together with her wings and gleaming armor—and the smoldering remains of the Alicia-monster that covered her—lent her the air of a warrior-angel that had just vanquished some terrible demon, denying it entrance into heaven.

He was startled by the sudden sound and sensation of the locking-clamps on his wrists and legs springing open. He sat up, rubbing his wrists, dazed and shell-shocked, but otherwise intact. His forehead and scalp were cut where the helmet had clamped around them.

"Father, are you all right?" asked Pris, approaching the table and putting a hand on his shoulder. Her eyes and voice were full of hope mingled with fear. "That's *two* you owe me now, y'know."

"Oh, *Pris*, come here," he said, plaintively, pleadingly, and embraced her with quaking hands and trembling arms. No hug he'd ever given or received had been so snug, so tight, or had felt so honest and true; not even any he'd shared with Alicia. They stayed that way for a few minutes; just father and daughter holding one another close, their heartbeats gradually slowing, their breathing growing less desperate, the darkness receding in the face of love's tender light. Then, the moment passed, as all tender moments do.

"Pris, oh Pris, I'm sorry . . . I'm so, so sorry . . ." he began, stammering. Then, he looked down. "Oh, please God, no—!" He began to cry . . . for there in her stomach lay a charred, ragged hole made of twisted metal and blood. Scarlet rivers quietly pumped from the wound. Tiny, neon-blue streams of glowing ones and zeroes, superimposed on the wound and flickering around her shoulders and neck, flashed in and out of existence, flowing back and forth like rivulets of electric water. She was de-rezzing. He turned his gaze back to hers, and she was smiling ever so slightly, a single tear running down one cheek.

"I guess this . . . is goodbye, father," she said softly. "It's been fun."

"No, *no!*" he cried. "Pris, it's virtual . . . just *virtual!* Like you! It's not *real*, you're *fine*, we'll fix it, I swear, *I'll* fix it, we'll—"

"No, Father," she said softly, shaking her head, smiling a weak little smile. "No. The wound's as real as I am. Guess it goes without saying that when I . . . blasted the *monster* . . . that I got hit, too. The particle-stream was a metaphor for . . . a virus that eats away at virtual synapses. Don't grieve . . . Father. After all . . . I was . . . always . . . just a dream. Time . . . to wake up now." She reached up and touched his helpless, ashen face, his quivering lower lip and his sad, pleading eyes. She gently stroked his cheek with her fingertips. Softly, she cooed, "Shh, shh. It's all right, Father. You'll be okay . . . promise."

For a painful few seconds, he was reminded of how Alicia had stroked his hair when trying to cool his temper or reassure him in troubled times. He took one last, long look at Pris, taking in the full beauty of her—her beautiful eyes, her sweet, innocent smile.

“All that we see or seem,” she quoted softly, “is but a dream within a dream.”

“Pris . . .” he began, but she cut him off with a single finger to his lips, and then died.

7 - *No Lesson Learned*

Victor opened his eyes—his *real* eyes—and then, with his nervous system slowly readjusting to actual reality, he reached up, grasped the NeuroGlass unit by the stems on either side, and took it off. He sucked in and let out a long, slow breath, then glanced down at the machine. Disgusted and sick to his stomach, his hands shaking, he threw it aside. It slid across the BlipGlass console of his desk—which now sat dark and silent—and crashed to the floor. He didn’t care if it was broken.

“Pris—” he began, but then stopped. She wasn’t there, and the fact that she was gone for good stung more deeply than any smack to his face ever could. He found himself wishing he could conjure her up just one more time, so that she could slap him again, and in doing so, defy the entire universe by being so violently passionate and therefore undeniably alive.

But she wasn’t. Not anymore. The fragile, childlike creature that he had brought into this world less than a year ago—with whom he had laughed, cried, and to whom he had taught the meanings of both tears and laughter—was gone, now. She could never be made again, either. The generative metacognitive algorithms that had been her “sugar and spice and everything nice” had been unique . . . her identity and memories contained not in ordinary programmatic structures, but in billions of virtual synapses, grown generatively in cyberspace rather than coded by hand. No, Pris had been as special and vital and individual as any flesh-and-blood person, and her sudden, silent absence ached deeply and tasted bitter, a mixture of fate’s venom and the ashes of perfection.

He grasped Alicia’s ad-hoc picture frame gently by one edge, handling it as though it were an artifact of some long-lost world. He stared at that frozen moment in time for several minutes, his thumb stroking her chin. Pris had had her mother’s eyes. Thinking of her and how she was gone—and how she had died saving him from whatever Noonian had twisted Alicia into—a sudden flash of burning anger overcame him, and with a mighty yell, he stood up and threw the picture frame across the room. It banged into the wall. The glass broke and shattered, the wood splintered. Victor collapsed back into the chair, put his head in his hands, and cried. He cried, and cried, and cried. He cried until his face and chest and tear ducts all hurt, until his cheeks burned and his throat was sore. Hot beads of stinging saltwater poured from his eyes in a ceaseless torrent, each rivulet minted of agony and torment. It took thirty minutes for his chest to stop heaving and his hands to quit shaking, and even though his tears did eventually dry, this would not be the last time he would shed them, neither for Pris nor for Alicia. And always, from the shadows, Noonian looked on . . . Victor felt him smile, a curdled and malignant grimace of mingled pity and hate.

Outside the windows of the lab, the unforgiving late-morning sun blazed in a cotton-streaked summertime sky and its beams played across the BlipGlass console of his desk, a

galaxy of dust-particles waltzing aimlessly in its embrace. Each was a miniature universe, he thought, and all the people living on all the worlds within were but infinitesimal and unimportant microbes, each of them thoroughly convinced that his or her tiny life—with all of its comedy and tragedy—was far more important than it actually was. And although he felt like a hollowed-out wreck, he smiled—if only a little. It was the harrowingly plastic non-smile of an aggrieved, middle-aged man who had just lost his daughter—and for the second time, his wife—and who was trying desperately to convince himself to be anything but a born-again nihilist. But it was a smile, a single ray of sunshine in which worlds could pirouette and whirl.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply for a few silent moments. Then, he opened them, sniffed the last of his sobs away, and dried his cheeks using his sleeve. He stared at the broken fragments of the picture frame as they lay on the floor, and went to pick them up. He would mend it; of course he would. The sinking gray quicksand of remorse bubbled in his gut. But even as it did, it turned to burning lava and then just as quickly cooled into hardened resolve. He would remake Pris, of course; and Alicia. Enough of Noonian and his nonsense about rituals and magic and arcana! He would figure out what went wrong—either that, or he would find some *other* way of returning Alicia to life. He would not stop.

No, not ever.